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Committee on Conferences
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Draft report

Addendum

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VI. Translation- and interpretation-related matters

Introduction and overview

1. At its 486th and 487th meetings, on 12 September, the Committee on Conferences considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, section VI, concerning translation- and interpretation-related matters (see A/62/161, paras. 84-86, Performance measurement and management; paras. 87-89, Self-revision; paras. 90-92, Contractual translation and quality control; paras. 93-98, Succession plans for language staff; and paras. 99 and 100, Impact of freelance recruitment on quality of interpretation at all duty stations).

2. Representatives of conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi participated via videoconference in the 486th meeting of the Committee and discussed the theme of training and mobility, and their implications for the quality of conference services.

Geneva

3. The Director of the Conference Services Division in Geneva reiterated the importance of increasing the resources which the Organization devotes to training. In the particular case of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, which had embarked on a process of reform to improve the quality, quantity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness of its services, the scarcity of training risked undermining quality. The departure of the 30 per cent of the staff of the Conference Services Division in Geneva who were due to retire in the coming six years would leave a gap in knowledge, skills and experience that must be filled through training and mobility. The ongoing information technology harmonization would play a vital role by ensuring that wherever staff moved, they would be using identical or similar systems and therefore reach optimum productivity faster. On mobility, the Committee on Conferences could help by recognizing the special

characteristics of language staff and paving the way for special mobility provisions for them.

Nairobi

4. The Chief of the Division of Conference Services in Nairobi expressed full support for the Department's continuous learning policies and requests for resources, which would maintain quality and facilitate the intergovernmental process. For various reasons, Nairobi had problems attracting and retaining language staff. To halt the continuous turnover, efforts must be made to make the duty station more attractive. Training efforts could help and had already been exploited to bring up to standard some examination candidates who had narrowly missed achieving the required results on their first attempt. Mobility could also help; perhaps staff who agreed to serve in Nairobi could be assured a transfer elsewhere after a time.

Vienna

5. The Chief of Conference Management Services in Vienna said that mobility and training were important elements of a learning culture that promoted continuous training and development. While there was room for future debate on whether uniform or differentiated training and individual or group training was most efficient or cost-effective, he said that he wished to focus on mobility and its relevance to Vienna, which was a small duty station with its own characteristics. The staff of the Conference Management Services there had been highly mobile, through lateral moves, promotions, temporary assignments and transfers to other duty stations. However, mobility and career development suffered because comparable functions in New York and Geneva carried higher grades than in Vienna. In order to address the problem, which had been highlighted as integrated global management efforts progressed, in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2008-2009 the Secretary-General proposed six senior interpreter positions and the abolition of five P-3 posts in the Translation Service in favour of P-4 posts. However, remaining obstacles consist of a lack of senior revisers in the translation sections and the practice of recruiting candidates from competitive examination rosters at only the P-2 and P-3 levels rather than also at the P-4 level, thus demotivating those with considerable experience.

New York

6. The Director of the Documentation Division in New York believed that while there was recognition of the importance of training for United Nations staff, this had not as yet been followed up by any increase in funding for training. The Department had long enjoyed a culture of continuous learning, recognizing the value of keeping knowledge, including staff members' mastery of developments in their mother tongues, up to date. The newly appointed departmental Training Coordination Officer, in his dialogue with all the language services, had confirmed that training was pivotal to the objectives of the Department and to the maintenance of skills, career development and staff morale. However, as conference service staff were part of a chain of production, withdrawing them from their functions to undergo training created a need for temporary assistance, which in the Department was properly termed temporary assistance for meetings as distinct from the Secretariat-wide general temporary assistance. Marking a new approach, a comprehensive

departmental training plan, with appropriate costings, was under preparation. This would be submitted to the Office for Human Resources Management, which controlled training resources.

Discussion

Geneva

7. In response to comments regarding requests for resources, the representative of the Conference Services Division in Geneva said that adequate resources were needed to satisfy the new demands for meeting and document services. It was vital for the Department to evolve a common approach to coping with the workload implications for the Division of decision 5/1 of the Human Rights Council on institution-building of the United Nations Human Rights Council and of the proposed revisions to the biennial programme plans and priorities for the period 2006-2007 (A/61/125).

Nairobi

8. The Chief of the Division of Conference Services said that his duty station had benefited from the Department's integrated global management project, especially through the assistance with information technology issues that was provided from New York and Vienna. However, as in the case of Vienna, there was a mismatch between functions and grade levels in Nairobi compared with Geneva and New York. The United Nations Office at Nairobi had limited control over the availability of conference-servicing resources, 50 per cent of which came from extrabudgetary funds under charge-back arrangements with the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

9. Representatives of the Secretariat said that the roster of successful candidates from the competitive examination for Arabic interpreters held in April 2007 was expected to be ready in September 2007 and might yield recruits for Nairobi as a long-term solution to the persistent vacancy problem that had been discussed at length in the Committee. A shorter term solution, covering approximately one year, had been found in the form of temporary staff. The chief of the Arabic Interpretation Service in New York had also tested the skills of freelance interpreters interested in working in Nairobi. It must be borne in mind that the vacancy rates in Nairobi for interpreters of some other languages were no better than for Arabic and that in any event interpreters in that duty station were sometimes idle because their workload varied. This resulted in an overall utilization rate of 50 per cent and to staff being loaned to other duty stations, a practice which raised the utilization rate to no more than 55 per cent.

New York

10. The delegations of the German-speaking States that provided extrabudgetary resources to fund the German Translation Section at Headquarters emphasized the valuable work performed by the staff concerned.

Vienna

11. In response to concerns expressed by delegations regarding problems with the inconsistent quality of freelance interpretation services and the inadequate revision

capacity to check the quality of contractual translation, the Chief of the Conference Management Service indicated that the issues affecting interpretation and translation both stemmed from the duty station's distinct development in the days before the integrated global management project. Member States rightly demanded the same level of quality in conference services in Vienna as they did elsewhere, yet staff in Vienna performed the same functions as elsewhere at lower grade levels.

12. While the number of interpreter posts requested in the budget for the next biennium fell far short of a full interpretation team, those posts would reduce to approximately 30 per cent the current 50 per cent reliance on freelance interpreters to provide services not only to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and other Secretariat bodies, but also to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization.

13. In the translation sections, by contrast, reliance on outside personnel working under contractual or off-site arrangements, with the necessary information technology support, was being increased substantially, creating a need for more systematic quality control and therefore for the recruitment of senior revisers at the P-5 level. If resources for such staff were denied, the only available solutions were not ideal: obliging staff at the P-4 level to perform functions outside their job descriptions; recruiting retired revisers on short-term contracts; or sharing the workload with other duty stations.

General discussion

14. Several delegations stated that they attached great importance to the principle of equal treatment of language staff. A number of discrepancies were noted in the conditions of recruitment of short-term language staff between certain languages and duty stations; it was unclear why some short-term staff were recruited as local regardless of their actual domicile. A representative of the Secretariat said that many factors entered into the use of temporary assistance, including the level of permanent staffing and the actual workload for a language or duty station and the availability of freelance staff on the local market, and that a difference in spending levels should not be perceived as discrimination. In addition, the declaration of domicile chosen by the temporary staff member must be respected. The specific case of discrepancies in grade for the chiefs of the Chinese and Russian copy preparation and proofreading sections needs to be addressed.

15. Concern was expressed at the demographic change that would be affecting the language services as a whole in the near future with the expected retirement of nearly 20 per cent of language staff within five years. There was a need for succession planning to ensure that the resulting vacancies would be filled in a timely manner and that experienced senior revisers would be available to train new staff. General proposals to deal with the situation included raising the mandatory retirement age and removing the ceiling on the earnings of retirees set by the General Assembly as a temporary measure during the period of the demographic shift. Outreach to colleges, universities and schools of translation and interpretation regarding language careers in the United Nations and other international organizations had resulted in contacts in the United States of America, Spain, Argentina, China and the Middle East, and those efforts would be pursued and expanded.

16. Some frustration was expressed at the long delays in recruitment of successful candidates from competitive examinations, sometimes as long as two years. A representative of the Secretariat agreed that the process was lengthy and labour-intensive, but was considered to be worth the effort because the goal was the recruitment of career professionals. Some of the delays occurred in the Office of Human Resources Management, which conducted a thorough and careful verification of the credentials of each successful candidate, although the process could be streamlined. In reply to questions regarding the use of targeted examinations to fill chronic vacancies in certain duty stations, he said that the Office of Human Resources Management was reluctant to authorize such a departure from established policy because of potential legal implications, although it had not completely ruled out the possibility. Such examinations would also limit the pool of candidates, risking a lowering of standards. It was agreed that a step-by-step approach was the best way to move towards a solution to those problems.

17. Quality control, especially of contractual translation, was another matter of great importance to delegations and to the Department, which had requested seven additional P-5 posts at Headquarters to meet a need that was expected to grow with the increasing use of translation companies. Satisfaction was expressed that regular meetings were being held between the translation and interpretation services for the coordination of terminology and the development of electronic glossaries. As part of integrated global management, a Terminology Coordination Board had been established for the harmonization of terminology used in the four main duty stations and the regional commissions.

18. In reply to questions regarding the application of the new performance measurement methodology, a representative of the Secretariat said that the workload standards previously used had proven to be one-dimensional, and if they were taken as the only measure of success, other targets, such as quality, could be missed. The methodology, which drew inspiration from the "balanced scorecard" for performance measurement, took into account a broad array of factors, including such areas as staff satisfaction.